DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 306 031 PS 017 964

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TITLE Parental Efficacy and the Development of Social Competence in Young Children.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Development; *Interpersonal Competence; *Locus of Control; *Parent Child Relationship; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; Social Development; *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *Parental Efficacy

ABSTRACT

This study examined the relation of two aspects of parental efficacy (locus of control and interpersonal support) to the social competence of 62 children aged 2 to 5 years in a preschool setting. The following assessment instruments were used: Schaefer's (1979) Locus of Control Inventory to measure parental locus of control; Paul's Home Support Inventory to measure interpersonal support; The Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning to measure the child's level of functioning; and the Preschool Version of the Classroom Behavior Inventory to measure the child's social competence as assessed by teachers and parents. One of the major findings of this study was that the child's development of social competence is interrelated with the dimensions of his or her development and ecology. In addition, locus of control appears to influence the way parents view their children's behavior; for example, externally controlled parents had negative assessments of their child's social competence. Three patterns of efficacy were identified: (1) the clear direction which externality gave to parent and child relationships at home, in school, and in the community; (2) the connection between significant support persons and the child's development of social competence; and (3) the interactional nature of development and the ecology. (RJC)

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PARENTAL EFFICACY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN YOUNG CHILDREN

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PARENTAL EFFICACY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN YOUNG CHILDREN

A renewed concern with children's social competence has prompted much discussion regarding the factors that influence this aspect of human development. As both societal and family contexts have changed dramatically, the socialization process has become more complex and a marked increase in antisocial behaviors has been noted (Burchard & Burchard, 1987; Magid & Mckelvey, 1988). While various studies have explored possible causes of this increase in socialization problems, only recently have researchers begun to unravel the underlying forces of this syndrome. For example, Bronfenbrenner (1979) and more recently White (1988) have noted the significant influence of parents on children's social development. Their conceptualization of parent/family attributes has provided a context for examining specific influences that relate to children's social competence.

Parental efficacy is one aspect of the parent/family ecology that influences children's socialization. Swick (1988) notes that parental efficacy is comprised of self image, locus of control, developmental status, and interpersonal support. It is believed that parents who are high in these attributes have a more positive influence on their children's social competence than parents who lack these efficacy indicators. Some evidence suggests this construct is a viable one. For example, Schaefer (1981) found correlations between parental locus of control and children's language development. He also postulated that social skills might be correlated with locus of control. Additionally, Rohner (1986) collected cross-cultural data that indicates parental warmth is related to the development of proactive social behaviors in young children. While some research suggests the possible linkage between parental efficacy and children's social competence, a need exists for articulating the nature of these relationships.

Focus of the Study

The focus of the study was on two aspects of parental efficacy (locus of control and interpersonal support) as related to the social competence of two, three, four, and five year old children in a

preschool setting. Building on the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), Schaefer (1985), Swick (1988), and Graves (1986) an attempt was made to explore parental locus of control and interpersonal support as related to children's social competence. The questions explored were: 1) Is there a relationship between parental locus of control and the parent's assessment of the child's level of social competence? 2) Is there a relationship between parental locus of control and the teachers's assessment of the child's level of social competence? 3) Is there a relationship between parental interpersonal support and the parent's assessment of the child's level of social competence? 4) Is there a relationship between parental interpersonal support and the teacher's assessment of the child's level of social competence? 5) Is there a relationship between the parent's assessment of the child's level of social competence and the teacher's assessment of the child's level of social competence? 6) Is there a relationship between and among parental locus of control and parental interpersonal support and the child's level of development and level of social competence?

Sample Selection

A sample of sixty-two children and their parents involved in the University of South Carolina's Children Center served as the population for this study. The Center is representative of all socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial groups. Sixty percent of the children are funded through a block grant from social services and forty percent are tuition paying.

Instruments

Schaefer's (1979) Locus of Control Inventory was used to measure parental locus of control. The inventory includes decision-making ability, amount of luck, and being successful as its major categories. It has a internal consistency reliability of .88 and a split half reliability of .90. The interpersonal support section of Paul's Home Support Inventory (1976) was used to measure interpersonal support.

It includes the major categories of receiving help from others, volunteering to help neighbors, and seeking advice. A reliability of .74 was established in three different studies (Paul, 1976; Swick, 1979; & Watson, 1981). The Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning (Dial, 1972) was used to measure the child's level of functioning. Content validity for the DIAL is 85.3% agreement (Dial, 1972).

The dimensions of considerateness vs. hostility and extroversion vs. introversion of the Preschool Version of the Classroom Behavior Inventory (Schaefer & Edgerton, 1978) was used to assess the child's level of functioning in terms of social competence as assessed by parents and teachers. The two pairs of bipolar dimensions are comprised of six positive items and four negative items. Internal consistency reliabilities computed with the Cronback Alpha ranged from .77 to .90.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data essential to the study was collected between May 1 and May 30, 1988. The DIAL was administered to the children on an individual basis and parent data was collected through both group meetings and individual conferences. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients were calculated to specify the relationships among the variables under study.

Findings of the Study

An analysis of the data gathered provided the following insights regarding the questions explored.

1) The data indicated that there is a relationship between parental locus of control and the parent's assessment of the child's level of social competence. Locus of control scores were correlated with the four dimensions of social competence, as rated by the parents. No

significant results were revealed when locus of control was related to considerateness (0.15701), extraversion (0.10022), and introversion (0.18804); however, when related to the dimension of hostility, a correlation of 0.27715 was determined (significant at the .05 level). (See Table 1).

2) No relationship was found between parental locus of control and the teacher's rating of the child's level of social competence. (See Table 2).

3) Although the correlations were not significant, there was a relationship between parental interpersonal support and the parent's assessment of the child's level of social competence. Statistical analysis yielded correlations of parental interpersonal support with considerateness (0.08602), extraversion (0.08602), hostility (-0.02873), and introversion (0.07336). (See Table 3).

4) A relationship was found between parental interpersonal support and the hostility dimension of the teacher's assessment of the child's level of social competence. The correlation of support to hostility yielded a negative relationship of -0.33426 (significant at the .05 level) (See Table 4).

5) A relationship between the parent's assessment of the child's level of social competence and the teacher's assessment of the child's level of social competence was established on all four dimensions: considerateness, 0.52259; extraversion, 0.31307; hostility, 0.37476; and introversion, 0.22042. All correlations were signficant at the .05 level. (See Table 5).

6) A significant relationship between and among parental locus of control and parental interpersonal support and the child's overall development and the child's level of social competence was established at the .05 level. (See Table 6).

The data from this study supports the premise that parental locus of control and parental interpersonal support are very influential in the child's development of social competence during the preschool years. Specific findings that impact this construct were: the influence of locus of control on parent assessments of the child's level of social competence; the influence of interpersonal support on parent and teacher judgments regarding the child's level of social competence; the connection between parent and teacher assessments of children's social competence; and the interrelationships between and among parent locus of control, parent interpersonal support, the child's overall development, and the assessment of the child's level of social competence by parents and teachers.

Discussion

The central theme of this study was that parental efficacy is a powerful influence on children's formation of social competence. Two dimensions of efficacy were explored: locus of control and interpersonal support. These dimensions were correlated with parental assessment and teacher assessment of the child's level of social competence as well as with the child's overall developmental status. One of the major findings of this study was that the child's development of social competence is indeed interrelated with the dimensions of his or her development and ecology. Parent and teacher assessments of the child's level of social competence, parent locus of control, parent interpersonal support, and the child's overall development were significantly interrelated (See Table 6), indicating that a "press of ecological events" influences children's developmental status--especially the variable of social competence. The current emphasis in early childhood education on the ecological nature of development and learning is certainly supported by the findings of this study.

Another important aspect of this study is the apparent influence locus of control has on the way parents view their children's behavior.

Externally controlled parents had negative assessments of their child's social competence, especially regarding the dimension of hostility. Item analysis of particularly significant aspects of the hostility dimension revealed important insights. For example, when locus of control item four (When there are decisions to be made, what I say makes little difference) was correlated with hostility a significant relationship emerged -- 0.38124. Locus of control item five also was highly related to the hostility dimension -- 0.35259. These correlations suggest that externally controlled parents might have a strong tendency to view any active orientation by the child as hostile. These findings are in accord with other studies in the area of locus of control and social competence (Loeb, 1975; Raine, 1982), which also have documented significant interactional relationships between these variables.

Additional data analysis revealed further insights regarding the locus of control and social competence relationship. Locus of control item four was positively correlated with the parent's assessment of the dimension of hostility in the child (0.38124), and negatively correlated to the teacher's assessment of the dimensions of considerateness (-0.27592) and extraversion (-0.31390). This further supports the theory that the more external parents feel, the more this externality is manifested in the social behavior of the child.

Interpersonal support also emerged as a major factor in parental and teacher assessments of children's social competence. Only the teacher's assessment of the hostility dimension correlated significantly with the interpersonal support variable (-.33426). This negative relationship suggests that the greater the parent's internality, the less the teacher perceives characteristics of hostility in the child's behavior. A similar perceptual orientation was found in parents but not at a significant level. However, specific items from the interpersonal support variable did show significance.

Parental interpersonal support item one (If one of my neighbors or members of my community needed help, I would be completely comfortable in volunteering to help), when correlated with the social competence dimensions of extraversion and introversion, as rated by parents, yielded significant values (0.27769 and 0.28898 respectively). Item six (If I had a discipline problem at home with my child, there are people in my neighborhood and/or community I could talk to about my problem) was also significantly correlated with the introversion dimension (-0.25033) and related, but not significantly to the extraversion dimension (-0.23126). Items related to neighborhood support and spouse/significant friend support were also correlated with these two dimensions. This strongly suggests that particular forms of support like close friends and spouses do influence the parent-child socialization process. Further, the interactional relationship between parental locus of control and interpersonal support established in this study raises some important questions: Do significant other people in the lives of parents establish a "culture" that permeates their ideological functioning? If so, the nature of parent support systems need a new, more qualitative analysis. The simplistic notion of more support, improved parenting does not hold up under close scrutiny. Another question that emerged is: If "cultures of externality" appear to surface among parents of highly traditional orientations, what intervention strategies can be used to alter such beliefs in a productive manner.

The significant correlations between parental interpersonal support scores and teacher's assessments of the child's level of social competence certainly adds strength to the idea that "isolation" of parents from meaningful life supports has a negative influence on their views of children. An "unhealthy agreement" between parents and teachers on children's lack of social competence signifies a need to assess teacher views of parental involvement. It is not enough for professionals to simply identify a lack of efficacy in children and parents. Plans to promote development in children and parents during the formative years of family life is a rationale for early learning

programs. Teacher ratings of children's hostility, for example, correlated significantly with parental interpersonal support. In an ethnography, carried out in a separate study in the same center, teacher behaviors supportive of parent involvement in parenting seminars were effective in altering parent perceptions of their children's social functioning (Swick, Gladstone, & Hayes, 1988). Parent intervention and support ideology and strategy must become engrained in the lives of professional child care workers. This training must go far beyond the mentality of surface involvement and focus on the key parenting behaviors/perceptions that promote social competence in the entire family.

Data from this study also provides a reminder that learning and development are integrated processes connected to each others' potential. While holistic growth constructs are supported, so are strategies that attend to impaired functions in child and family development. Correlations of children's developmental status (motor, concept, language-communication skills) with teacher's ratings of children's level of social competence were significant. For example, children who scored low on motor skills, communication skills, and concept skills were judged as more likely to be hostile by their teachers. A similar pattern was noted between parent assessments and children's developmental status. While these relationships reinforce the need for attending to holistic development, data also suggests the need to deal with specific impairments. In the case of this study, for example, hostility was consistently related to all variables in the parent-teacher context. Anecdotal records of children's behavior (maintained as a part of a corresponding study by Swick, Gladstone, & Hayes, 1988) confirmed the statistical findings and pointed to the need for special emphasis on social learning skills strategies.

The results of this study not only support the construct that parental efficacy is a powerful influence on children's development butalso point to the complexities of the process that makes for

efficacious parents. The two dimensions of efficacy studied (locus of control and interpersonal support) revealed at least three significant "patterns" as related to both parents and children's development.

One pattern was the clear direction that externality gave to parent and child relationships at home, in school, and their overall transactions in the community. Schaefer (1983) has accurately noted the negative influence of a parent belief system that is predominantly pessimistic and fate-filled. Interactional relationships among locus of control, interpersonal support, and parent and teacher ratings of children's level of social competence suggest that externally controlled parents are perceived as powerless by their children, their friends, and their child's teachers. The high level of hostility in children of external oriented parents may well represent a desire to have more meaning in their lives. What is most disturbing about this pattern is that teachers seem at a loss on how to respond to such passivity. Parent involvement training must address this trend by providing professionals with intervention tools by which they can instigate some internal locus of control skills in parents. Further, curriculum planning must focus on building children's sense of efficacy. In essence, patterns of internality must be integrated into the family-school-community ecology.

A second pattern that emerged was the connection between significant support persons and the child's development of social competence. Particular interpersonal support items that correlated significantly with social competence categories were related more to spouse, friends, neighbors, and child care supports than to more distant services that might reside in agencies or institutions. For example, introversion was significantly related to neighborhood friendships; hostility to both spouse support and friends; and overall social competence to intra-family well being. This suggests that massive efforts to create institutional supports might be less effective than strengthening the family's power base through more sensitive child care arrangements, responsive neighbors, and more humane work place arrangements. Experimental and ethnographic

studies on "close to the family" support structures deserve serious study and efforts to humanize social agency services need renewed attention. Finally, child care professionals need to awake to the critical role they play in the parents social development.

A third pattern evidenced in this study was the interactional nature of development and the ecology. Children judged to be very hostile were also deficient in other developmental areas such as motor skills, concept development, and communication skills. In the same regard they were perceived as socially impaired by both their parents and teachers. Other recent studies have also noted this "ecology of pathology" syndrome (Burchard & Burchard, 1987; Magid & McKelvey, 1988). This pattern of low control, low support, and social pathology suggests the need for a comprehensive approach to early childhood development. Family-school-community designs advocated by Gordon as early as 1968 and more recently by Swick (1987) are deserving of more serious consideration. In this sense, quality child care is encompassing of parent education, family counseling, work place connections, and community involvement. Modern conceptual and technical paradigms offer new possibilities for supporting the development of trusting, intimate, and productive social living in families.

Parental integrity (especially the dimensions of locus of control and interpersonal support) must become a major focus of the early childhood professions. Adults and children learn from each other in ecologies that comprise the evolving makeup of the next generation. The center of this evolving pattern of life resides in the family and the and the potential for strengthening this system has never been greater; what is called for is new thinking and new strategies for helping parents create warm, intimate, and viable modes of living.

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